

CORPUS CHRISTI

by

HAROLD RILEY



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The Institution of the Feast

THE most ancient feasts of the Church are those that commemorate events, either events in the life of our Lord, or the deaths of the Saints. The first half of the Church year is specially concerned with the events of the Gospel story, and it was only after a long time that the custom arose of consecrating days for special devotions. So the feast of the Holy Trinity was in the Middle Ages instituted for the Sunday after Pentecost, and the feast of the Blessed Sacrament on the following Thursday.

The actual day of the institution of the Blessed Sacrament was Maundy Thursday. On that day, the day of our Lord's betrayal and the eve of his death, our minds do indeed turn to the thought of the great gift he gave us, but they are also filled with solemn thoughts of the passion itself. It is therefore not possible to make that day a feast of rejoicing of the kind we should wish to keep in honour of the Sacrament of the Altar.

The observance of the feast of Corpus Christi (the Latin name, meaning "The Body of Christ," that has become familiar to us) owes its beginning largely to a Belgian nun named Juliana (1193-1258), who had a great devotion to the Blessed Sacrament, and through whose desire for such a feast, Bishop Robert of Liege ordered its celebration. From Belgium the observance of the feast spread to other places, and in 1264 it became customary throughout Western Christendom. The date chosen for it was the first Thursday outside Eastertide, that is, the Thursday after Trinity Sunday. It met a real need, as supplying a special time for thanksgiving for the institution of the Blessed Eucharist, and for honour to be paid to our Lord in his sacramental presence.

The Last Supper

The central rite of the Christian religion is that which was instituted by our Lord on the night before

he died. In the Upper Room, at his last meeting with his disciples, when their minds were filled with the thought of the ancient rites of the Passover and with the anticipation of his death, our Lord took bread, and blessed it, and broke it, and gave it to them, saying "This is my Body." Then after supper he took the cup of wine, and blessed it and gave it to them, saying "This is my Blood of the New Testament." By so doing he instituted a perpetual memorial of his death, gave his disciples the means of having a part in his own Sacrifice, and gave himself to them as the Bread of Life. Our participation in his Sacrifice is what we call the offering of the Mass ; our receiving the sacred Gifts is what we call Holy Communion.

Our thanksgiving and our reverence are due to our Lord whenever we are present at the Sacrifice of the Altar, and whenever we receive Holy Communion ; but just as our daily worship of the Holy Trinity is helped, and not hindered, by having a special feast on Trinity Sunday, so our devotion to the Blessed Sacrament at all times is fostered by having a special commemoration on Corpus Christi Day.

The Services of Corpus Christi

The services for Corpus Christi were amongst the most skilfully and beautifully compiled of all services. The master-hand that arranged them in their ancient form was that of St. Thomas Aquinas, a great scholar and a great Saint, with a deep devotion to the holy Eucharist. There is not space here to describe all the services that he arranged for the feast, but we shall consider the special parts of the Mass itself, and the hymns that he wrote.

The *Introit*, or opening anthem of the Mass, is taken from Psalm 81, with its wonderfully appropriate words "He fed them also with the finest wheat flour," and its invitation "Sing we merrily unto God our strength, make a cheerful noise unto the God of Jacob." The feeding of the ancient people of Israel in their wanderings in the wilder-

ness is a fore-shadowing of the feeding of the Christian people with the Bread of Life. So the rejoicings of the old Israel ought to be surpassed by those of the Catholic Church, which has received, not "the shadow of good things to come" but the good things themselves.

The *Collect* is a beautifully composed prayer addressed to our Lord himself. (Most of the Collects are addressed to God the Father). In it we pray to our Lord, that as beneath a wonderful Sacrament he has left us a memorial of his passion, so he would grant us so to venerate the sacred mysteries of his Body and Blood, which we receive in it, that we may ever feel within ourselves the fruit of his redemption.

The *Epistle* is from St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians, in which the Apostle reminds his converts of the truth that he himself had received from our Lord, and which he in his turn, as the pastors of the Church have done since, had delivered to them. So he recounts again the events of the night of our Lord's betrayal, and adds "For as often as ye eat this bread and drink this cup, ye do shew the Lord's death, till he come." Then, because of the evil and irreverent ways in which the Corinthians had been acting, the cause of St. Paul's having to write on this matter, he warns them of the seriousness of the guilt of unworthily receiving Holy Communion, and admonishes them to examine themselves concerning it. Those, he adds, who eat and drink unworthily, eat and drink judgment to themselves, for they do not discern the Lord's Body.

In the *Gradual*, or chant after the Epistle, we have combined the desire of the Old Dispensation. "The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord" (*Ps.* 145); and its satisfaction in the New, "My flesh is meat indeed" (*St. John* 6); and this is followed, as is the Gradual on some other days by a special hymn, called the *Sequence*.

The Sequence of Corpus Christi, one of St. Thomas Aquinas's own hymns, is long, and deserv-

ing of careful study. From its first words ("Laud, O Sion, thy salvation," English Hymnal 317), it is full both of careful theological statement and tender devotion. Majestically it carries us forward, and as it approaches the end, the verses get longer, until from the thought of the first institution and of our present reception of the Holy Communion we pass to the thought of the heaven where we shall at last, we pray, still be guests at the Feast of the Lord:

"Thou who all things canst and knowest,
Who on earth such Food bestowest,
Grant us with thy Saints, though lowest,
Where the heavenly Feast thou showest,
Fellow-heirs and guests to be."

The *Gospel* is taken from the sixth chapter of St. John, and is part of the discourse on the Bread of Life. In it our Lord speaks of his Flesh as food indeed, and his Blood as drink indeed, and promises that they who eat and drink them dwell in him as he dwells in them, and live by him. The few short verses are full of teaching to those who ponder on them.

The *Offertory* sentence again takes us back to the ancient rites of the Jews, who by their priests offered "the offerings of the Lord made by fire and the bread of their God."

The proper *Preface* (before the *Sanctus*) used on this feast is that of Christmas, the feast when the Church has already thought of the Body that the Son of God took of a pure Virgin.

The *Communion-verse* repeats words of the Epistle, warning us again of the reverence due from us, with a special appropriateness at the time of our Communion.

It will be obvious that besides these special parts of the Mass, other parts also will have a special significance at this festival. The Consecration itself, for example, will speak to us with a new significance on this day when everything concentrates our attention on the meaning of the most holy Sacrament. We ought to be able to receive Holy Communion on

this day with an added fervour of devotion.

Apart from the text of the Mass, we may notice some of the other great eucharistic hymns St. Thomas Aquinas gave to us. At Evensong the "office" hymn, (*i.e.* the special hymn for this "office" or service) is "Sing, my tongue, the mystery telling, of the glorious Body sing," (English Hymnal 326), with its well-known last two verses beginning, "Therefore we before him bending." This hymn is similar to one of the Passiontide hymns ("Sing, my tongue, the glorious battle," English Hymnal 95), and is meant to remind us, as the Mass itself does, that the Blessed Sacrament unites us to the passion of our Lord.

The same thought of the passion is to be found in the hymn "The Word of God proceeding forth" (English Hymnal 330), of which again the last two verses ("O Saving Victim, opening wide" etc.) are very widely known.

A third hymn ("Thee we adore," English Hymnal 331) is sometimes known as the "Rhythm of St. Thomas Aquinas"; unlike the other hymns it is not narrative in form, but is addressed to our Lord himself; the personal devotion of the writer comes out therefore even more clearly than in the other hymns.

Eucharistic Devotion

The popularity of the feast of Corpus Christi was shown in ancient days by the many customs that gathered round it. In some places cycles of "Corpus Christi plays" were acted; processions in honour of the Blessed Sacrament were the universal practice. After a long period of neglect in England, the observance of the feast has again become firmly established, and in a country where thanksgivings for the natural food that we receive through the harvest are so popular, we ought to be specially eager to give thanks for the Bread that endureth to everlasting life.

We have of course to remember that the feast of

the Blessed Sacrament is not given to us in order to exhaust our devotion, but to be a consecration of all our year to it. The centre of the Catholic life is the eucharistic worship of God at the Altar, and its chief source of power is the reception of the most holy Sacrament. They therefore who keep the feast do so in order that they may kindle anew their devotion, and rededicate themselves to the eucharistic life.

In one of the old antiphons to the Magnificat, St. Thomas points out to us the focus points of our devotion. "O sacred Banquet," he sings, "in which Christ is received, the memory of his passion renewed, the mind filled with grace, and a pledge of future glory given unto us." Here there are three things that should be ever in mind. First, the Blessed Sacrament recalls the past to us, and renews the memory of the passion. Its first purpose is the continual remembrance of the Sacrifice of the death of Christ, which we plead at the Altar. The worship of the Catholic Church is rooted in the past, and especially in those saving acts of God of which the Gospel is the proclamation. Secondly, the Blessed Sacrament is our food in the present, and by it "the mind is filled with grace." Here in this world we pass, like the Israelites of old in the wilderness, on the road that leads to our promised land, and in his mercy God provides the food we need for our journey. The Sacrament of Holy Communion is not the reward of the Saint, but the sustenance of the sinner, the chief means for the strengthening of our souls to help us on our way. Thirdly, the Blessed Sacrament is a promise and earnest of our heavenly reward, for by it "a pledge of future glory is given unto us." It is indeed "the medicine of immortality"—one of its earliest names.

Rightly then do we keep a feast in honour of so great a mystery, and rightly do we use the feast to renew our understanding of what God has done for us, our thankfulness for his goodness, and our resolve to profit by so great a Gift.